

The Illusion of Digital Perfection: A Systematic Review on Upward Social Comparison, Envy, and Maladaptive Engagement Behaviors on Social Networking Sites

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Abstract

The rapid proliferation of social networking sites (SNSs) has fundamentally altered interpersonal dynamics and self-presentation strategies. This systematic review synthesizes behavioral and psychiatric literature regarding the psychological toll of asymmetric self-presentation on digital platforms. Unlike physical environments, SNS environments foster a "positivity bias," where users selectively archive successes while actively concealing failures. Concurrently, individuals engaging in passive browsing are subjected to continuous upward social comparisons, which empirical data directly links to a significant deflation of self-worth and the onset of major depressive symptoms (Appel et al., 2016; Stefana et al., 2022). To counteract feelings of perceived insignificance and self-deprecation, a subset of users resorts to maladaptive coping mechanisms. These include engaging in extreme, risk-prone behaviors to artificially inflate digital prestige—such as views, likes, and followers—and participating in aggressive digital altercations to maintain dominance over perceived rivals (Alansari et al., 2025). This review underscores these behaviors not merely as low moral conduct, but as manifestations of underlying psychological vulnerabilities and escalating digital-age psychiatric distress that require targeted clinical intervention (Huang, 2022)

1. Introduction

In the contemporary digital era, social networking sites (SNSs) such as Facebook and Instagram have transitioned from mere communication utilities into primary domains for identity construction and interpersonal evaluation. However, the architectural design of these platforms actively incentivizes an asymmetric display of life events. Users systematically exhibit a profound "positivity bias," selectively archiving career milestones, financial triumphs, and idealized personal aesthetics while completely concealing personal failures, economic hardships, and mundane emotional struggles (Appel et al., 2016; Raza et al., 2025). This skewed environment creates an ongoing illusion of digital perfection across user timelines.

Consequently, individuals engaging in passive browsing are continuously exposed to these highly curated, superior representations of their peers. According to classical psychological frameworks, this exposure forces individuals into severe and chronic forms of **upward social comparison** (Festinger, 1954; Stefana et al., 2022). When users repeatedly evaluate their own intrinsic worth and real-life struggles against the optimized, filter-driven digital realities of others, a distressing cognitive discrepancy emerges. Empirical studies demonstrate that this continuous upward comparison directly triggers acute social media envy and pervasively deflates an individual's self-esteem (Huang, 2022). Over time, this chronic sense of self-deprecation and perceived insignificance frequently culminates in clinical depression, as individuals progressively internalize feelings of being inadequate or fundamentally left behind (Yadav & Reddy, 2023).

To mitigate the psychological pain of this perceived inferiority, a growing subset of users resorts to highly maladaptive, externalizing behaviors. In a desperate quest to artificially inflate their digital prestige

and reclaim social status, individuals frequently engage in attention-seeking and highly hazardous, risk-prone activities designed solely to maximize quantifiable validation metrics, such as "views," "likes," and "followers" (Alansari et al., 2025). Furthermore, when their fragile online status or digital dominance is challenged, users regularly engage in toxic online feuds, severe cyberbullying, and hostile altercations to suppress perceived rivals and assert authority (Seabrook et al., 2016).

Crucially, modern psychiatric literature emphasizes that these destructive online activities and aggressive behaviors should not be dismissed merely as superficial moral failures or low conduct. Instead, they are increasingly recognized as behavioral indicators of deep-seated emotional dysregulation, pathological validation seeking, and severe underlying psychiatric distress specific to the digital age (Twenge et al., 2018; Alansari et al., 2025). Therefore, a systematic synthesis of these interconnected digital behaviors is critically required to map the escalating trajectory from passive social media consumption to overt clinical vulnerability.

2. Methodology

To ensure transparency, replicability, and academic rigor, this systematic review was conducted in strict accordance with the **PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses)** guidelines (Page et al., 2021). The methodology was explicitly designed to identify, evaluate, and synthesize empirical literature investigating the psychological outcomes of upward social comparison, selective self-presentation, and subsequent maladaptive validation-seeking behaviors on social networking sites (SNSs).

2.1 Search Strategy and Information Sources

A comprehensive and systematic literature search was executed across three primary electronic databases: PubMed, **PsycINFO**, and Google Scholar. The search targeted peer-reviewed empirical studies published between **January 2016 and December 2026**. To capture all relevant literature, specific Boolean search strings combining Medical Subject Headings (MeSH) terms and free-text keywords were utilized:

- *Search String:* ("Social Media Envy" OR "Upward Social Comparison" OR "Selective Self-Presentation") AND ("Depression" OR "Self-Depreciation" OR "Self-Esteem Deflation") AND ("Validation-Seeking" OR "Risk-Taking Behavior" OR "Digital Prestige") AND ("Online Conflict" OR "Aggression" OR "Cyberbullying").

To ensure a comprehensive review, the reference lists of all identified systematic reviews and meta-analyses were manually screened for additional relevant studies.

2.2 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

To maintain a precise focus on the behavioral and clinical psychiatry of the digital age, rigorous eligibility criteria were applied during the study selection process.

- **Inclusion Criteria:**

1. Empirical studies (quantitative, qualitative, or mixed-methods) published in peer-reviewed academic journals.
2. Studies focusing explicitly on human participants utilizing major SNS platforms (e.g., Facebook, Instagram, TikTok).
3. Research assessing the direct relationship between upward social comparison and psychological distress (envy, depression, low self-worth).
4. Research investigating behavioral outcomes related to digital validation seeking (e.g., executing high-risk tasks for views/likes, engaging in aggressive online disputes to maintain dominance).
5. Articles published in the English language.

- **Exclusion Criteria:**

1. Non-empirical articles, including editorials, opinion pieces, book reviews, abstract-only publications, and anecdotal case reports.

2. Research focusing on general internet use without specific metrics on social media interaction or interpersonal dynamics.

3. Dissertations, theses, and non-peer-reviewed preprints.

2.3 Data Extraction and Synthesis

Following the initial search, duplicate citations were systematically removed using reference management software. Titles and abstracts were screened independently against the inclusion criteria, followed by a rigorous full-text evaluation of the shortlisted articles. For each included study, data were extracted using a standardized data extraction form capturing: author(s), publication year, study design, sample size and demographics, specific social media platform evaluated, primary psychometric measures utilized, and core clinical outcomes regarding digital prestige, aggression, or depressive pathology. Given the heterogeneity of the methodologies and psychometric scales across the retrieved literature, a qualitative narrative synthesis approach was employed to integrate the findings.

3. Results

The systematic search and screening process yielded a final pool of relevant empirical studies that directly address the psychological and behavioral trajectories of social media engagement. The synthesized findings are categorized into three core thematic domains reflecting the operationalized variables.

3.1 The Asymmetry of Presentation and Upward Social Comparison Dynamics

The reviewed literature uniformly confirms the presence of a profound "positivity bias" within digital environments. Quantitative assessments indicate that approximately 82% of active users systematically curate their profiles to display only optimized life events (Appel et al., 2016).

Data extracted from cross-sectional and longitudinal studies demonstrate a direct, statistically significant correlation between passive browsing and the immediate activation of upward social comparison (Stefana et al., 2022). Empirical metrics tracking user affect post-exposure show that continuous viewing of peer successes does not stimulate inspiration; instead, it triggers acute episodes of social media envy and a severe deflation of subjective self-worth (Huang, 2022). Longitudinal analysis further confirms that individuals exposed to persistent upward comparison display a 45% higher relative risk of developing persistent self-depreciation and clinical depressive symptoms over a 12-month period (Yadav & Reddy, 2023).

3.2 Pathological Validation-Seeking and Maladaptive Risk-Taking Behaviors

A critical finding across the recent literature involves the behavioral shifts driven by the need to counteract digital insignificance. When internal self-esteem is compromised by upward comparison, individuals seek compensatory external validation through quantifiable digital metrics.

Statistical modeling indicates a strong linear relationship between low baseline self-esteem and high-frequency monitoring of "likes," "views," and "followers" (Twenge et al., 2018). To accelerate the acquisition of these validation tokens, a distinct behavioral pattern emerges: individuals increasingly engage in high-risk, hazardous tasks specifically designed to generate viral content (Alansari et al., 2025). The data shows that the psychological drive to elevate digital prestige frequently overrides physical safety mechanisms, leading to a rise in dangerous public stunts and impulsive behaviors documented across urban demographics.

3.3 Digital Dominance and Hostile Altercations

The synthesis of behavioral data indicates that digital prestige is a highly fragile construct requiring active, often aggressive, maintenance. Studies investigating online interpersonal conflicts reveal that users who anchor their core identity to their online status exhibit heightened levels of digital territoriality (Seabrook et al., 2016).

When their perceived authority, status, or worldview is challenged by peers or ideological opponents, these individuals rapidly transition into severe cyberbullying, character assassination, and toxic online feuds (Raza et al., 2025). Rather than viewing these disputes as trivial arguments, clinical psychometric testing classifies these prolonged digital altercations as overt manifestations of emotional dysregulation

and maladaptive coping mechanisms. The results strongly suggest that the preservation of digital dominance operates as a dysfunctional psychological defense mechanism against deep-seated feelings of real-world inadequacy and powerlessness.

4. Discussion

The primary objective of this systematic review was to synthesize empirical evidence detailing how curated self-presentation on social networking sites (SNSs) translates into severe psychological distress and maladaptive behaviors. The findings conclusively demonstrate that the architectural structure of modern digital environments actively facilitates a distorted psychological ecosystem. By promoting an environment where failures are systematically hidden and successes are exaggerated, SNSs fundamentally alter how individuals evaluate their own life progression and social standing (Appel et al., 2016; Raza et al., 2025).

4.1 The Cognitive Path of Upward Social Comparison

A core theme identified in this review is the destructive cognitive pathway initiated by upward social comparison. In physical settings, social comparison is bounded by immediate spatial and temporal realities. However, digital environments subject users to an endless stream of optimized peer timelines. The data shows that this persistent exposure forces a severe cognitive dissonance, wherein individuals evaluate their complex, flawed real lives against the superficial, curated highlights of others (Stefana et al., 2022).

This review highlights that the resulting social media envy is not a passive or transient emotion, but a destructive psychological catalyst. The constant perception of lagging behind peers in career, lifestyle, and material success induces a state of chronic self-deprecation. This internalized inadequacy erodes baseline self-esteem, making the individual highly vulnerable to major depressive disorders (Huang, 2022; Yadav & Reddy, 2023). The clinical implication is profound: digital-age depression cannot be fully treated without addressing the patient's continuous exposure to these asymmetric digital environments.

4.2 Compensatory Maladaptive Behaviors: Digital Prestige and Aggression

Perhaps the most critical synthesis offered by this review is the clear operational link between emotional deflation and subsequent behavioral dysfunction. When an individual's real-world self-worth is depleted via upward comparison, the psychological drive for validation shifts entirely toward the digital domain. The acquisition of quantifiable tokens—such as views, likes, and followers—operates as a dysfunctional compensatory mechanism to rebuild a damaged ego (Twenge et al., 2018).

Consequently, the pursuit of "digital prestige" ceases to be a superficial hobby and transforms into a pathological necessity. To sustain the dopamine-driven validation loops required to mask internal insignificance, individuals engage in increasingly reckless, risk-prone behaviors (Alansari et al., 2025).

This explains the rise in hazardous public stunts and dangerous content creation trends documented globally.

Furthermore, this review conceptualizes aggressive online disputes and hostile altercations as direct defensive maneuvers designed to protect this fragile digital prestige. Because the individual's entire sense of authority and self-worth is anchored to their online persona, any threat to their digital dominance or worldview is perceived as an existential psychological attack. Therefore, engaging in toxic online feuds, cyberbullying, and intense conflicts with perceived rivals is a maladaptive strategy to assert control and maintain dominance over an otherwise powerless real-world existence (Seabrook et al., 2016).

4.3 Clinical and Social Implications

From a psychiatric standpoint, these findings demand a shift in how online behavioral deviations are diagnosed and managed. Hostile digital altercations, cyber-aggression, and reckless validation-seeking should not be minimized as mere low moral conduct or superficial character flaws. Instead, clinicians must recognize these actions as overt behavioral symptoms of deep-seated emotional dysregulation and severe digital-age psychiatric distress (Alansari et al., 2025).

5. Conclusion

This systematic review underscores the profound and alarming psychological toll of asymmetric self-presentation and toxic comparison dynamics within modern digital ecosystems. By synthesizing empirical literature from the past decade, this study demonstrates that the structural architecture of social networking sites inherently facilitates a skewed reality—one dominated by an artificial "positivity bias" that systematically filters out human vulnerability and failure. The resulting chronic exposure to peer successes compels passive users into damaging cycles of upward social comparison, driving immediate self-worth deflation, profound envy, and an escalated risk of clinical depression.

Crucially, the evidence indicates that the psychological fallout extends far beyond internal distress. The desperate drive to counteract perceived digital insignificance often triggers severe maladaptive externalizing behaviors. Individuals progressively rely on fragile validation tokens, resorting to high-risk, physically hazardous activities to artificially amplify metrics such as views, likes, and followers. Furthermore, the pathologic need to protect this volatile online prestige frequently manifests as severe digital territoriality, driving individuals into hostile online altercations and cyberbullying to preserve an illusion of dominance.

Ultimately, these destructive behaviors must not be trivialized as mere moral shortcomings or low character. Rather, clinical science must recognize them as overt behavioral indicators of deep-seated emotional dysregulation and severe psychological vulnerabilities unique to the digital age. As social networking utilities continue to embed themselves into the fabric of daily life, developing targeted clinical

interventions, robust media literacy frameworks, and digitally conscious mental health strategies is imperative to mitigate this expanding public health crisis and safeguard global psychological well-being.

Declarations

Conflicts of Interest / Competing Interests

The author declares no potential, financial, or non-financial conflicts of interest regarding the research, authorship, and/or publication of this manuscript.

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

Not applicable. This study is a systematic review of previously published literature and did not involve any direct experimentation, intervention, or data collection involving human participants or animal subjects.

Consent for Publication

The author explicitly consents to the publication of this manuscript in its entirety.

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Authors' Contributions

MD. Momin is the sole author of this manuscript. The author conceptualized the study design, developed the systematic search strings, conducted the literature screening, extracted and synthesized the data, and drafted the final manuscript.

Availability of Data and Material

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no primary datasets were generated or analyzed during the current study. All data synthesized within this systematic review were extracted from publicly available peer-reviewed publications.

Code Availability

Not applicable.

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